

SUNDAY

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EDITORIALS

Don't run, Sheriff Baca

He should not seek reelection in 2014 but instead focus on reforming his troubled department.

LEE BACA HAS BEEN Los Angeles County sheriff for nearly 16 years, and the last five have brought an extraordinary cascade of scandals that have exposed the dismal state of the department and the jails he runs. As a new election season begins, Baca should make the best of a bad situation and announce that he will not seek reelection in 2014. Instead, he should focus his attention on reforming the department while clearing the field so that candidates will step forward to run for his job.

What possible argument is there for a fifth term for Baca? Evidence that sheriff's deputies regularly beat inmates in the jails is mounting, and a wide-ranging federal investigation has been launched, including an FBI probe into criminal wrongdoing. Separately, the U.S. Department of Justice concluded last month that sheriff's deputies in the Antelope Valley repeatedly violated the civil rights of African Americans and Latinos. Allegations of special treatment for Baca's friends and political donors have been a recurring theme over the years.

Baca has repeatedly claimed to be unaware of the troubling goings-on in the department he's supposed to lead — the violence, the gang-like cliques of deputies, the dearth of meaningful oversight. But lack of

knowledge is no excuse. That's why the Citizens' Commission on Jail Violence blasted him last year for ignoring multiple warnings and declining to ask probing questions or to implement reforms. The commission called it a failure of leadership and concluded that if the CEO of a private company had been so completely in the dark, his board of directors would probably have replaced him.

Next June, the voters of Los Angeles County will be asked to elect a sheriff. So far, no credible challengers have emerged. Baca's likely opponents include Lou Vince, a little-known Los Angeles police officer, and Patrick Gomez, a retired Sheriff's Department lieutenant who has twice run unsuccessfully for the job. Paul Tanaka, Baca's former top aide, is rumored to be preparing to challenge his former boss, but he has been accused of encouraging misconduct and abuse in the department.

It is extremely difficult for an outside candidate to raise the money or build the campaign organization necessary to unseat an incumbent. In fact, at least since 1932, no incumbent L.A. County sheriff has ever been unseated. If Baca were to announce that he would not run again, it would open up the field and make a credible race by a credible candidate much more likely.

Even if Baca remains in the race, we hope that a competent, experienced challenger will step forward to run a serious campaign against him. It's time for voters to focus on this important but mismanaged county department and the many serious problems there that need to be addressed.

FBI's jail inquiry may end this year

Mon 8-5-13 LA Times

Sheriff Baca has been interviewed but says he's been assured he's not a target.

BY ROBERT FATURECHI
AND VICTORIA KIM

The federal investigation into allegations that Los Angeles County sheriff's deputies abused inmates is expected to conclude within the next five months, according to U.S. Atty. Andre Birotte Jr., who is overseeing the probe.

"My sense is the investigation, one way or the other, will culminate certainly before the end of this year," Birotte said during an interview with The Times' editorial board last week.

E The FBI has been investigating the sheriff's jail system — the largest in the nation — since at least 2011.

Sheriff Lee Baca told The Times he has been assured he's not a target; but he, his spokesman and many of his top commanders have been interviewed. Federal authorities have also interviewed inmates and lower-level jailers, and have subpoenaed extensive internal records.

Sources familiar with the investigation have said that at least two federal grand juries have taken testimony. Legal experts say that allegations of abuse, if substantiated by investigators, could result in charges against the deputies involved and possibly their direct superiors if, for example, they played a role in covering it up.

Federal authorities also have been investigating whether sheriff's officials purposely hid an inmate from the FBI after they discovered he was secretly

[See Jail, AA6]

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LATIMES.COM

FBI probe of jails expected to end this year

[Jail, from AA1]

working as a federal informant and collecting information on allegedly abusive and corrupt deputies.

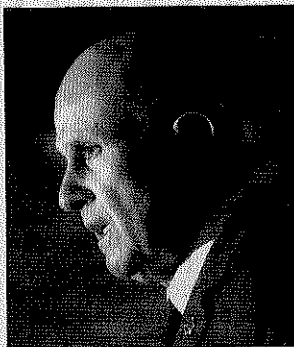
In that case, The Times reported that sheriff's officials launched an operation called Pandora's Box, in which they moved the inmate — a convicted bank robber — to a different jail under fake names, including Robin Banks. Baca's spokesman has said the inmate was moved not to hide him from the FBI but to protect him from deputies because he was "snitching" on them.

Deputies involved in the operation have said otherwise and pointed to Baca and his top aide at the time, Paul Tanaka, as being involved.

When that inmate informant was first discovered, Baca publicly blasted the FBI and defended his jails. But he's since agreed to a sweeping set of reforms aimed at preventing abuse and improving accountability.

So far, only one deputy has been convicted in connection with the federal probe: a jailer who admitted to taking a bribe to smuggle the inmate informant a cell-phone.

Interviews with people with knowledge of the probe, however, have revealed that the federal scrutiny of the Sheriff's Department has extended beyond the jails to



IRFAN KHAN Los Angeles Times

L.A. COUNTY Sheriff Lee Baca runs the nation's biggest jail system.

deputy cliques and allegations of corruption. One deputy said he wore a wire for the FBI to secretly record a department supervisor over allegations of improper fundraising.

Federal authorities have generally remained tight-lipped or vague about what they're looking at and about what kind of indictments — if any — they expect.

Last week, Birotte said, "There's a lot of information. It's a big investigation. I'm very big on the notion that you dot your I's and cross your Ts."

He said he's been getting briefed on the probe every couple of months and is urging his people to be thorough so the end result will stand up to scrutiny.

robert.faturechi
@latimes.com
victoria.kim@latimes.com

Erratic pace on discipline

It took two months to fire four social workers on slain boy's case, but almost three years to even charge a deputy with rape

SANDY BANKS

I've been out of town this week, and watching from afar the machinations of our county government surprised and mystified me.



It took just two months to decide to fire four social workers involved in the case of an 8-year-old boy who was beaten to death in May, allegedly by his mother and her boyfriend.

But it took almost three years to decide to charge a sheriff's deputy with raping a woman he'd threatened to arrest in 2010.

Both cases happened in Palmdale in the Antelope Valley, which suggests that the outskirts of Los Angeles County need a little more scrutiny and a lot more TLC.

The delay in the deputy's case seems unfathomable to me.

Deputy Jose Rigoberto Sanchez stopped a woman while on overnight duty in September 2010, and allegedly offered not to arrest her on an outstanding warrant if she had sex with him. She said he ordered her into the back seat of his patrol car, then drove to a desolate spot in the desert where he raped and sodomized her.

She called the Sheriff's Department to complain the next day. The department took away his badge and his gun and suspended Sanchez — with pay — while it investigated the case.

In January 2011, the department sent its findings to the district attorney's Justice System Integrity Division, which investigates criminal allegations of official misconduct.

And there the case sat for the next 30 months — until Sanchez, 28, was charged this week with 11 felony counts, including rape, sodomy and kidnapping, involving two female motorists.

I know investigations can be complicated endeavors, but if the Sheriff's Department could finish its inquiry in four months, what could possibly take the D.A. 2 1/2 years to decide whether to prosecute?

They won't answer that question, of course. Public disclosure might jeopardize the case, spokesman Jane Robison said. "We conducted an extensive investigation, and filed it when we believed we had evidence beyond a reasonable doubt to secure a conviction."

In the meantime Sanchez was chilling at home, cooling his heels on the

taxpayers' dime.

And the woman who reported him was living in fear, puzzled and wounded by authorities' silence.

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When the deputy, a seven-year veteran of the force, was arrested and jailed this week, his paychecks finally stopped. That's a couple of years and a couple of hundred thousand dollars too late by my account.

The D.A.'s own protocol for handling reports of criminal misconduct by cops requires "review ... in a timely manner" and directs prosecutors to "inform the law enforcement agency within 60 days regarding any filing decision."

In this case, the victim wasn't even interviewed by prosecutors until August 2011, almost one year after she'd reported being attacked and raped.

The woman is now suing the county. A declaration in that civil case, filed by the D.A. in January, offered this explanation for the interminable wait:

"Due to the changes in the management of the Los Angeles District Attorney's office, the decision to file criminal charges as to Deputy Jose Sanchez has been delayed."

No one but the victim seems bothered by the delay. "In terms of the

length of the investigation, I'm not going to cast aspersions on any entity," sheriff's spokesman Steve Whitmore said. "Investigations regrettably take what they take."

But the woman's lawyer, John C. Taylor, said she has spent the last few years looking over her shoulder. "She's scared. She's made this very serious complaint and the deputy knows where she lives." Still, she's grateful that the county finally decided to prosecute, he said.

The case against Sanchez now includes a second victim, a woman whom the deputy allegedly pulled over two nights later and tried to bribe — sex in exchange for not being arrested — in front of a witness.

And 34 months later, the process to fire Sanchez is finally underway.

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At the other end of the spectrum is the unusually quick and decisive punishment of four social workers who were terminated this week for lapses in judgment in the case of Gabriel Fernandez, whose mother and her boyfriend have been charged with torture and murder.

The Department of Children and Family Services has for years been under fire for lengthy in-

vestigations and lax discipline in cases where children died. But in just two months, new director Phillip Browning's probe discovered enough "red flags ... that just didn't go heeded" to justify the firing of two caseworkers and two supervisors.

I'm not sure now whether to wring my hands or applaud.

I'd called for "heads to roll" when the Los Angeles Times reported the details of Gabriel's death. The child's life was a horror story, illustrated with bruises, black eyes, a busted lip and BB gun wounds that should have been hard for social workers to ignore.

Then social workers bombarded me with horror stories of their own: Unconscionable caseloads, unreasonable edicts, unending obstacles; a toxic stew of ingredients that poisons the child-saving process. Their job, it seems, is a tightrope walk through dysfunction and disaster.

Still, none of that excuses dereliction or incompetence.

Firing those workers won't fix the system or save the next Gabriel Fernandez, but it does send a message: Justice delayed is justice denied. Accountability matters.

sandy.banks@latimes.com

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SANDERS TO HEAD CHILD SAFETY PANEL

The former DCFS chief will lead L.A. County's reform of programs to protect abused children.

BY GARRETT THEROLF

Los Angeles County's new Blue Ribbon Commission on Child Protection selected David Sanders to lead its far-reaching effort to reform programs for the county's abused and neglected children.

Sanders was elected chairman at the commission's first meeting Thursday, bringing significant credentials as the former child welfare chief in Los Angeles and Minneapolis.

Sanders currently serves as an executive at Casey Family Programs, an influential nonprofit group dedicated to child protection reform.

Sanders said the commission would take a big-picture look at all relevant county departments and contractors with a simple mission: "There has to be confidence that people are treated fairly and kids are safe," he said.

'There has to be confidence that people are treated fairly and kids are safe.'

— DAVID SANDERS,
head of Los Angeles County's
new Blue Ribbon Commission
on Child Protection

Sanders led Los Angeles County's Department of Children and Family Services from 2003 to 2006 and was considered a rival of current chief Philip Browning to lead the department after the 2010 ouster of the agency's top executive, Trish Ploehn.

Ploehn had previously served as a key aide to Sanders during a period when the number of the children placed in foster care decreased dramatically and the county placed greater emphasis on keeping families together through education, drug treatment and other support.

At Casey Family Programs, Sanders helped lead a 10-year nationwide campaign to reduce the number of children in foster care.

That record could put Sanders at odds with Browning's emphasis on safety in response to a series of child fatality and torture cases.

That policy shift has coincided with an increase in the number of Los Angeles County foster children from 18,700 to 19,700 during the last year.

Sanders said it was too early to predict what the commission might eventually recommend.

He said he is focused on establishing a meeting schedule and ground rules for the group's access to confidential child welfare records.

On Thursday, members of the public raised a variety of issues they want the county to address, including poor-quality foster homes, high rates of detention for black children, union rules that protect problematic county workers and high caseloads for agency workers.

The commission was narrowly approved by the Board of Supervisors in a 3-2 vote after the torture death of Gabriel Fernandez, an 8-year-old Palmdale boy who had been the subject of repeated calls to the county's child abuse hotline.

garrett.therolf
@latimes.com